
# The 'Art' of Writing

## Great writing is more than words on a page

By

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# Before I Begin

I'm going to use the words 'great writing' in this Real Journalism Newsletter. Some might call it the 'art' of writing. Before I begin I want to say that no news writing is 'great' if it's dishonest, inaccurate, or lacks objectivity. If you haven't already read the previous newsletter, please do that now. Anything I share about the 'art' of writing news or other mass media information is based on the points I made last time. Thanks.


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The objective of writing for news and other mass media should be ‘great’ writing. Why be an ordinary or mediocre writer when you can be a ‘great’ writer?

Great writing is something ‘some’ writers work toward their entire career. Others don’t seem to care whether their writing is even ‘adequate.’ They seem pleased to punch in, punch out, and call it a day.

Not so with people who really ‘care’ about becoming a great writer. When people tell them they are great writers, great writers often believe they could have done better. I’m thinking of some of the best fiction and non-fiction authors through the centuries. In private communications or public declarations they would remark about how they could have done a better job with a particular work. They realize that ‘great’ writing is a goal that can take a lifetime to accomplish. Great writers are often humble — not all, but some. They understand the definition of ‘greatness’ and know there’s more for them to do in their journey towards it.

To make this even more challenging is how many journalists or other mass media communicators can put out ‘great’ writing under the intense pressure of daily deadlines. Maybe some can, but probably not the majority of us. However, that doesn’t mean we shouldn’t try. Don’t let the lack of time lull you into a sense of writing something that barely passes for ‘acceptable’ just because you’re short on time. I worked in enough newsrooms through the decades to know that many journalists are good at wasting time. Gathering, confirming, and writing should always be the top priority rather than

goofing off until a manager yells at you to get to work or ask why you haven't finished your story yet. Journalists should shoot for something far beyond acceptable. How about 'exceptional' writing? That sounds like a much better goal.

The same goes for media specialists who may work in small or large offices. Your goal should be the same as a journalist — great writing.

# Hard Work and Perseverance

If you're going to do anything well, it will take hard work. Great writing does not come easily. It usually begins as the journalist is headed to a story and gets details on the way. I didn't have access to a mobile phone when I started as a reporter in the 1960's. I carried a pocket full of dimes in my pocket and stopped at phone booths multiple times during the day to get information, set up interviews, double check what witnesses told me, check with sources, etc. Today's journalists have so many communication tools available to them compared to what we had 60 years ago, so there's no excuse for them to not use their time in the news car gathering and confirming facts.

The writing process continues as the journalist talks with people, gets people on the record, and gets all sides to a story. Driving back to the station is where the writing ideas should mesh. You may still have some facts to check when you get back to the newsroom or office, but a journalist or media specialist should have a good idea about how they're going to write their story. If a journalist is in television, they

should already have two or three ‘standups’ recorded. That gives them choices when they get into the edit booth. If a journalist or media specialist is in radio, they should have several ‘actualities’ (interviews) and plenty of ‘natural sound’ to use as they edit. That helps bring a story to ‘life’ when there are no pictures or video.

‘Great writing’ often includes harsh scrutiny by editors — and sometimes even outright rejection. However, it’s worth the heartache when you write something that communicates exactly what you intended. It’s worth the time re-writing when your readers, listeners, or viewers gain the best understanding possible of a news story or other information. Doing your ‘best’ should always be the goal of every story you cover and write.

Question: how do you become a great writer? So much of the writing we read and hear in the media today is mediocre at best. Some of it is terrible — embarrassingly terrible. Another question: how do we get news and mass comm writers out of that ‘terrible’ pit? Talent helps, but I think a big key that unlocks the writing door for many is ‘hard work’ and ‘perseverance.’

There's an old saying that 'writers write.' Someone who is 'born to write' loves to write. If you are a journalist, public relations specialist, or other communication professional, you should love to write. If you don't love to write, reconsider what you're doing to earn a living.


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The process of ‘improving’ news and other mass media writing is both easy and hard — simple and complex. That’s one of the great joys of being a writer. Here are several recommendations if you want to be a ‘great’ writer —

1. Read great writing — read great fiction, great non-fiction, great news stories, great sports stories, great news releases, great speeches, etc. .. read writing that impresses you, then ask what was it about the story,

article, or book that impressed you .. what made it great? Take note of what you discovered and use those techniques to move you toward greatness.

2. Write .. write .. write — you don't become really good at something by just thinking about doing it .. do it! Writers write and they keep writing .. keep any writing you think is bad, then compare it later to writing you think is better, maybe even great .. why did you think the earlier writing was bad and the later writing was great? Was it because of self-editing? Was it because the writing process opened your mind to better ideas? Learn from your own writing experience and use what you learn as you grow as a writer.
3. Write short and fast — journalists and other mass media professionals often have to write multiple news stories, press releases, public relations papers, etc., quickly .. one way to improve your writing under those conditions is to practice writing short sentences quickly .. your first drafts may not be great, but that doesn't matter when you're practicing .. the whole idea of practice is to find what works best for you .. once you develop the ability to turn out many stories or other information quickly that

are written well, are clear and easy to understand, and meet all the requirements for accurate and objective reporting, you're well on your way to becoming a 'great' writer.

4. Practice writing the same story at different lengths — it's easy to write longer stories that give you plenty of space to explain the information .. it's hard to write shorter stories that still cover the most important aspects of the information .. imagine that you cover a complex story and are responsible for covering it well in 800 words .. not too hard, right? That was my daily responsibility when I wrote stories for newspapers. However, I was also writing the same stories for radio, television, wire services (AP & UPI), and radio networks .. each had different time or length limits .. how do you take a complex 800-word story and boil it down to 30 words, 40 words, 60 words, or even 100 words? Practice!
5. Practice writing in both 'your voice' and the 'voice of someone else' who might be reading your story — if you work for a small radio or TV station you may write and read your own material so it's good to know how to write in 'your voice' .. that includes your tone, meter, pace,

pauses, changes in volume, etc. .. however, if you work for a larger radio or TV station you may write stories or information that someone else will read (e.g. news anchors, show hosts, spokespeople, etc.) .. how do you learn to write in some else's 'voice?' Listen carefully to how they speak, learn their cadence, where they pause for effect, how and when they raise and lower their volume, their tone, inflection points, etc. Your job is to make them sound great through both your writing and their talent .. if they sound great, you've done your job.

6. Edit your own writing even if you know an editor is going to read your copy before it's published or broadcast — if you depend on an editor to catch your mistakes you'll become sloppy and lazy .. you won't improve as a writer because you'll depend on someone else to catch your mistakes or make you appear to be a better writer .. you may find yourself without a job when a company decides to downsize the staff .. managers notice things .. just sayin'.

# Next Time

How do you start the process that leads to becoming a ‘great’ writer? I’ll share some time-proven ideas with you in the next Real Journalism Newsletter.

1960s Radio News, © Mark McGee